

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

January 14, 2021

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary
United States Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Secretary Ross:

We write today concerning the recent enactment of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA), which was part of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021. The CRRSA includes an additional \$300 million for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to assist fishery participants who have suffered significant losses caused by COVID-19. We urge that this funding be distributed to states in an equitable manner that takes into account commercial landings and revenues, aquaculture revenues, and actual losses sustained by fishery participants.

Section 12005 of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act appropriated \$300 million to the Department of Commerce to establish a disaster relief program to support fishery participants who sustained serious losses caused by COVID-19. On May 7, 2020, NOAA released its state-by-state allocation plan for distributing these funds, which included approximately \$4.5 million for the Commonwealth of Virginia, or just 1.5 percent of the total allocation. We were extremely disappointed by this allocation and believe it does not accurately reflect Virginia's contribution to the national seafood industry or the economic harm sustained by Virginia's seafood industry since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to NOAA's 2018 Fisheries of the United States report – the most recent data available – Virginia's commercial landings totaled \$177 million, or 3.2 percent of the total amount of commercial landings in the U.S. The Commonwealth is home to approximately 1,850 seafood processing and wholesale workers, which represents 3 percent of the nation's total. In addition, according to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2018 Census of Agriculture, Virginia aquaculture growers had sales of over \$112 million, or nearly 7.5 percent of the country's total aquaculture sales. NOAA's previous allocation of roughly \$4.5 million resulted in Virginia watermen receiving significantly less per dollar of commercial landings and aquaculture sales and far less per seafood worker than many of their fellow fishery participants in other states.

Further, we believe future NOAA COVID-19 funding allocations must take into account the nature of catches in various states. For example, in Virginia, shellfish growers make up more than 80 percent of the Commonwealth's aquaculture industry, and they have faced unique barriers shifting their production from restaurants – which overwhelmingly represents their market – to grocery stores and other markets. These unique barriers have contributed to extraordinarily high losses within this industry compared to others within the seafood industry.

We believe NOAA must take into account these varying circumstances when determining funding allocations to states.

We understand fishery participants across the country have struggled mightily due to the COVID-19 pandemic and NOAA must make difficult decisions with limited resources. However, we are concerned that fishery participants in Virginia have yet to receive adequate relief proportional to their role in our nation's seafood industry. To that end, we request NOAA allocate no less than \$10 million in CRRSA disaster assistance to Virginia, based on the contribution of Virginia's fisheries to the national catch. We also request that NOAA make available the metrics used to determine its state-by-state funding allocations and consult with regional Marine Fisheries Commissions and eligible states to help determine equitable allocations.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to continuing to work with the Department and NOAA to ensure our nation's fishery participants receive the assistance they need to combat the devastating effects of COVID-19 on the seafood industry.

Sincerely,

/s/ Mark R. Warner

Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

/s/ Tim Kaine

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

/s/ Elaine G. Luria

Elaine G. Luria
Member of Congress

/s/ Robert C. "Bobby" Scott

Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress

/s/ Robert J. Wittman

Robert J. Wittman
Member of Congress

/s/ A. Donald McEachin

A. Donald McEachin
Member of Congress